DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 333 731 FL 019 221

AUTHOR Kelley, Eileen; Sweet, Diane
TITLE Transitioning from Community College ESL: An Ethnographic Perspective.
PUB DATE Mar 91
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (25th, New York, NY, March 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Persistence; *Classroom Communication; *Community Colleges; Developmental Studies Programs; *English (Second Language); Ethnography; Interaction; *Limited English Speaking; *Mainstreaming; Second Language Instruction; Student Attitudes; Teacher Student Relationship; Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

A study investigated factors affecting participation, engagement, and retention of non-native English-speaking students (NNSs) in community college mainstream classes. The student sample included three classes in developmental English at a small western Massachusetts community college. Data were drawn from taped classroom observations and student and teacher interviews. Analysis focused on classroom interaction and interpersonal negotiation critical to learning but often difficult for a NNS in the college mainstream. Preliminary results indicate that NNSs are, in general, much less willing to speak aloud, share assignments aloud, or respond to teacher questions, even though they know the correct answer or have homework completed. Teachers questioned the competence of NNSs, but limited opportunities for NNS success by enforcing implicit norms of classroom participation. Teacher expectations, including negative perceptions and interactional norms unfamiliar or unknown to the student, were also found to be influential in the teacher-student relationship. Student responses to teacher attitudes include withdrawal and defensiveness. The participation and success of students in one class suggest that certain teacher behaviors played an important role, including use of multicultural course content, high expectations that were well communicated, and teaching class norms at the outset. Additional patterns emerged through the ethnographic technique of triangulation. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Kelley

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Eileen Kelley

Diane Sweet

TESOL '91

New York, NY

ED333731

Transitioning from Community College ESL: An Ethnographic Perspective

For quite some time, the issue of transitioning from ESL has been of concern to the profession. It is no secret that many students leaving ESL classes and entering into the educational "mainstream" often meet with difficulty or failure. This study has grown out of my concern with the non-native English speaking population at a small community college in western Massachusetts. There, the story is the same - most of those students who are mainstreaming from ESL are encountering negative experiences that are making the students decide not to continue with their education. The purpose of my research is to find out what is happening at the crucial stage of mainstreaming - what are the factors that come together to influence participation, engagement and retention of non-native English speaking students?

Background of the study

There have been many studies that attempt to account for the low academic achievement of minority students. One of the most popular recent theories is that of cultural discontinuities (also known as home/school discontinuities.) Studies have been undertaken which show

FL019221

2 BEST COPY AVAILABLE

particular problems that are faced by children whose home culture is radically different from that of the social mainstream. Often, these young students experience failure because of lack of understanding of socialization norms from the child's background. Studies by Philips (1982) and Heath (1982) have shown that adapting to a community's ways of communicating could increase participation of students who traditionally showed little participation.

Another hypothesis is what Trueba (1989) call minorities' response to schooling. Much of this hypothesis is based in the work done by John Ogbu (1978). According to Ogbu, low academic achievement is disproportionate and persistent only among some minority groups. He believes that there are two distinct kinds of minorities: those who regard themselves as immigrant minorities, and non-immigrant or castelike minorities who are indigenous minorities or subjects of former colonial territories. According to Ogbu, these groups have different folk models of schooling which encourage different patterns of behavior, and immigrant minorities do relatively well in school, while the non-immigrants do poorly in school.

Ogbu believes that there is a tendency of castelike minorities to equate the culture of the schools with the culture of the dominant group and to equate schooling with acculturation and the loss of one's own cultural identification.

Other theories explain how socioeconomic factors and parents' roles affect performance of students. And though these theories do help us to understand what may be happening to minority students, as Trueba (1989) says, these hypotheses place the burden of success or failure on the shoulders of the ethnolinguistic minorities and immigrant groups

themselves. Also, the participants in this study are not children - they are either adolescents and adults, facing the added pressures and barriers to participation that are particular to non-traditional students. Some of these barriers, as identified by Pat Cross (1984) include cost of education, time limitations, home responsibilities, job responsibilities, not having child care, being tired of school, no way to get credit or a degree and fear of being too old to begin.

The study is taking place at a small community college of about 3000 students in western Massachusetts. It is located in a town which has seen a large influx of Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican families over the last 20 years. Many of the elementary and secondary schools in the community have responded to these changes in the community through the implementation of transitional bilingual education programs, as well as magnet schools and other innovative programs. However, the community college has a relatively new ESL program (in existence since 1986), and the faculty at the college have little experience in dealing with non-native English speaking students. As of 1991, fewer than two percent of the NNS students from the community have graduated from the college after leaving the ESL program. Though many people at the college have their own "folk theories" as to why students are not succeeding, no one has really paid close attention to the problem. In order to accurately capture what happens to these NNS after they leave the ESL program, I decided to do an ethnographic study which focuses on the participation of NNS in the mainstream college classes. The narrow focus for this ethnography is the "Developmental English" class. This is the non-credit English reading or writing class which a student must attend if he or she does not receive a satisfactory score on the college's English placement exam. After exiting

from the ESL program, many students elect to take a developmental English course in order to "get more practice with English" or because they feel that the required Freshman composition class (English 101) will be "too hard". Other ex-ESL students are advised to take one or two developmental classes in order to have more preparation for English 101.

For the purposes of this study, I chose three developmental English classes to observe for the Fall of 1990. "Participant observation" is an integral part of ethnography, and so I became a participant observer in these classes for the Fall semester. (see handout) I attended "Class A/B" on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and "Class C" on Tuesdays and Thursdays. In addition to observing, I took fieldnotes from every class observation, audiorecorded many classes, interviewed (and audiorecorded) 14 students at least once each and formally interviewed the two participating instructors at various times throughout the semester. Taped observations and interviews have resulted in approximately 46 hours of audiotape. Several students and teachers of other developmental classes were informally interviewed.

Class A/B

This class was unusual in that it was a combined Reading and Writing course which met for two hours a day, three days a week. This means that the students in the class had the same instructor for both reading and writing. Also, the instructor was concerned that she have a balanced number of NNS and NS. The researcher's role in this class depended on the day - sometimes I was only observing interaction, other days I would participate in small group discussions. I also helped them with their English during writing sessions in the computer lab.

Class C

A typical developmental reading class, this met twice a week from 11:00 to 12:15. Students either took writing with another teacher, or were not concurrently enrolled in developmental writing. My role in this class was one of observer and interviewer - I was not introduced to the students until the middle of the semester, and many students thought I was also a student in the class.

Importance of Interaction to Learning

Interaction in the classroom is central to this study because interaction is central to participation and achievement. In order to see the importance of interaction, this study considers the Vygotskian idea that conceptual learning is a collaborative enterprise involving dialog with child and adult. Bruner(1986) shows how education is a mutual (teacher-student) "culture-making" enterprise. According to Bruner, most learning in most settings is a communal activity, a sharing of the culture. A child (student) must make knowledge his own in a community of those who share his sense of belonging to a culture. The meaning of social concepts in the world is in interpersonal negotiation, and when we are puzzled about what we encounter, we renegotiate its meaning in a manner that is concordant with what those around us believe.

This negotiation involves participation and is critical to learning, but can be very difficult for the non-native English speaking student in the college mainstream. A student for whom English is not a first language not only has to deal with differing linguistic norms, but cultural norms as well. John Gumperz states that teaching and learning must be treated as interactive processes that require the active participation of teachers and students to ensure that information is conveyed as a precondition for

learning. It is clear from the research evidence that interaction and participation are required for success in the academic mainstream. But how is participation defined by the actors involved? And what happens to the NNS who was once a successful student in the ESL class but is now having difficulty in the mainstream?

Interpretations of the Data

Through analysis of the data collected in this study, some preliminary patterns have been found which show that some non-native English speaking students are not, in fact, participating or experiencing success in the mainstream classes, and which show some reasons why there is a lack of participation.

Speaking in class

The data show that NNS who are first-language dominant speak very little in class, if at all. Students are unwilling to read aloud, share their assignments out loud, or even respond to questions from the teacher.

Through observation as well as interviewing, it has become clear that these students often know the correct answer, or have their homework assignment completed, but lack the confidence to speak aloud in the class. They worry about being "the only person with an accent" or that the teacher and other students will not understand them. Several students echoed what Chenh, in Class C told me in an interview: "I don't feel like talking. Sometimes he asks me and I know the answer, but I don't talk." Another example of this is on page two of your handout. The day after this conversation between Iris and the interviewer, Iris spoke in class for the first time (Dec. 4). As ESL professionals, many of us realize that our students may go through a "silent period", and we are used to dealing with this. However, instructors who are not trained and who do not have

experience dealing with NNS students often interpret this silence as poor attitude, lack of interest or lack of linguistic or cognitive ability. As Gordon Wells (1986) says,

> "What pupils learn from what is presented to them depends not only on what they bring to the learning encounter in the form of their linguistic repertoire and associated knowledge of the world, but also on the content and form of what is presented to them and, even more important, on the opportunities they are given to enter into negotiation with the teacher concerning the meaning and significance for them of what they are expected to learn. Where such opportunities are lacking, unfamiliarity with the specific content or uncertainty about the purpose of the activities they are required to engage in may overwhelm pupils whose linguistic resources are quite adequate for the task in hand and reduce them to silence or apparent incompetence."

Throughout this study, instructors have questioned the competence of their NNS students. Through data collection, however, it has become clear that the often implicit norms of classroom participation that are enforced by the instructor limit the opportunities for NNS success, especially when they are not made explicit. After three NNS failed their first quiz in one class, the teacher said he was surprised they had done so poorly. As he told me, "They don't ask questions, they don't say they don't understand and they don't come to see me. From all indications I have, they understand what's going on in class." However, after observing the limited relationship and interaction between the instructor and the NNS

students, their poor performance on the quiz came as no surprise to the researcher. The students had not learned or conformed to the interactional norms for the class, and were largely being left to their own devices by a teacher who didn't want to "hold their hands".

Teacher expectations

Teacher expectations seem to play an important role in the relationship between student and teacher. In one class, the instructor happily told me of one student he had who was "an exception to the rule of Hispanic students" because he was "bright and a hard worker". This student is completely proficient in English, and English proficiency is often interpreted by instructors as "intelligent", or the capacity to use higher-order thinking skills. In fact, there is evidence that being verbal and English-proficient in class is often equated with being "a hard worker" and vice-versa. As Jenny Cook-Gumperz (1986) points out, "Even today when someone is described as using 'bad grammar' it seems to suggest not only a lack of education but also a lack of proper judgement."

How do students cope with these negative perceptions and unfamiliar or unknown interactional norms? In Class C, one of the NNS who passed the course did not speak in class from September 4 to December 4. Two others dropped out by the middle of the semester, one because, according to her, the teacher scared her and she became so nervous that her doctor advised her to drop the class. Other students become defensive, as illustrated by the following example. One of the NNS in a classroom had a question about a previous assignment in the class. The instructor had just finished getting the students into small groups and explaining their task when the student, whom I will call Ana, asked her question. The instructor then told Ana to concentrate on the task at hand, and that if she

had a "problem" she should see the instructor in her office during her office hours. Ana replied, "I don't have a problem, you have a problem." Subsequent interviews showed that the instructor didn't like the student's "attitude", and that Ana was upset that the instructor had turned the student's question into a "problem".

How do ESL classes at the community college prepare students for "mainstream" classes? During this interview with Ana, she recalled how her ESL teachers would explain things she didn't understand, and answer questions in class rather than ask the student to go to her office. Many students seem to have a difficult time adjusting from the known norms of the ESL class to the new norms of the mainstream class. Students who were active and verbal in ESL classes are often quiet in the mainstream. However, this does not have to be the case.

In Class A/B, almost all of the students participated and enjoyed a successful semester. I say enjoyed, because the students made many comments such as, "This is my favorite class.", "This class is so fun.", and "Chris is my favorite teacher." Also, there was a very low absence rate and low rate of withdrawal or dropout, which is very unusual for a developmental English class at the college in question. Some of the reasons for the success of this class follow.

Personalizing the class

The instructor seemed to use every opportunity at her disposal to relate the content of the class to the students and their background knowledge.

She made sure everyone got to know each other at the beginning of the semester, learned everyone's name (and the correct pronunciation) and encouraged social talk in the classroom ("Anyone do anything exciting this

weekend?"). She also sat with the students and shared her own examples of writing. The instructor believes that it is important to have a personalized class, and that it is much easier to do when the class is combined reading/writing, and therefore they spend more hours together. Also, the writing comes directly out of the reading, and helps to build a consistent context in the classroom.

Multicultural Content

The instructor of class A/B chose such reading material as Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Kozol's Rachel and Her Children and Guidelines, a cross-cultural reading/writing text. Using the written text as a basis for classroom conversation, the students in class A/B would get into some very heated discussions. Those with louder voices most liked to participate in the large group discussion, and those who did not like to compete with the more outspoken students talked more in their small groups. They were given ample opportunity to meet in both small and large groups, and many students expressed a preference for one or the other.

Expectations of Instructor

This instructor had very high expectations for all of her students and let them know it. They had to work very hard, and many commented on how the class was difficult, or that the instructor was "a hard marker". However, the students felt respected by the instructor. They were encouraged to become independent learners , and to depend on each other when they needed help. She worked at reducing student-teacher dependency. If a student walked in late and asked Chris what they were supposed to be doing, it was not unusual to hear Chris respond "Ask your group." Or if a student asked when an assignment was due, or when the next quiz was, Chris would answer "Look on your syllabus." Chris also

referred to how the developmental class would help the students in their subsequent classes like "101, Biology, etc." Other instructors often try to use this same tactic for showing the value of developmental classes - but phrase it as one instructor did: "You'll have to do this in a normal class...". Several students have told how instructors have made them feel "stupid" by telling them that they're in a developmental class because they're "not good enough for 101". At the beginning of the semester in Chris's class, I often heard comments such as "Isn't this supposed to be easy?" The instructor demanded performance from the students, but didn't expect them to sink or swim - she engaged in "hand-holding" when she deemed necessary, and made sure the students knew the class organizational and interactional norms.

Teaching class norms

Starting at the first class of the semester, Chris explained the class norms to the students. One example of this is making sure the students understood the very organized syllabus, and what was expected of them throughout the semester. (See handout) Chris could also monitor students' progress through a journal they wrote during the semester, and had personal conferences with them.

Chris seemed genuinely concerned that her students understand the material and class discussion. She consistently asked for clarification and got students to expand on their answers in order to get more detail and description. She related speaking to writing and reading, and tried to get students to see the similarities and contrasts across skills. During a detailed discussion, Chris would say "That's the kind of detail I expect in your writing."

Chris also found strategies to help students who did not speak in class. One day she asked Juan to share a paper he had written. When Juan responded that he did not want to read it, Chris suggested that he let another student read it for him. He did so, thereby having the fact that he did the homework validated by the teacher. In all other classes, observations showed that when a teacher asked a NNS to answer a question or read something and the NNS did not immediately respond, attention then went to another student. A typical example of this kind of exchange is the following is on your handout.

NNSs are having both negative and positive experiences when they reach the mainstream at this particular community college. However, any conclusions reached from a study like this must involve careful analysis of data. Data must be collected from as many sources as possible, and any interpretations must be triangulated to ensure reliability.

Triangulation

A parable to relate the concept and purpose of the various forms of data analysis in ethnographic research could be John Godfrey Saxe's poem, "The Blind Men and the Elephant" It is about six blind but very curious men who wanted to see the great elephant. Each of them fell against and felt a different part of the elephant's body, so consequently, they each had vastly different impressions of how it looked (spear, snake, tree, wall, fan, rope). At this point they all began to argue and stubbornly defend their positions and/or opinions. The moral evident here is that although each of them was partly right, all of them were wrong. Because perception is so selective, it is very important for ethnographic researchers to incorporate multiple triangulation techniques in their data analysis.

Numerous measurement tools and calipers are used in quantitative research for accuracy such as stop watches, rulers, physical triangulation equipment, etc. which would not do for this type of study, because in ethnography you do not know specifically what you are looking for. Although the general problem is discovery of the society in question, (in this case, the two classroom cultures in this community college) the specific problem is not defined until much observation, data collection and analysis is done.

The researcher, assistant, students, teachers, and other informants in this study are analogous to the blind men except that the ethnographer must know the limitations of each of the participant/observers alone and try to piece together all the data into the most complete elephant possible. (All of the informants involved in this study have been thought of as participant/observers - even if unknowingly - as it has been the goal in this type of research to encourage them to teach their culture and perspectives.) How was the data pieced together to extract patterns? As previously mentioned, the data has been collected in several ways and through the analysis various patterns have emerged. Not only did the ethnographer observe, but I also assisted as a triangulator to do select observations, interviews and listen to/analyze tapes of classes and interviews. Triangulation occurs as you are collecting and analyzing data - it is the act of putting what you observe and your own personal biases into perspective. It is important to triangulate during the data collection/participant observation process as it can give new direction to the study, highlight potential problems in the study or the process and help verify norms and find patterns. It is the validation step in ethnographic research in that alternative explanations are gathered. This gives a

"quantifying" characteristic to the observations and data collected which in turn, leads to the proving of hypotheses.

This type of data analysis also keeps the observer from getting hooked on first impressions. For example, in examining the initial notes taken by both the ethnographer and assistant, it became apparent that the first impression of Chris's class was at a surface level. The class was observed to be very active and verbal with both native and non-native speakers talking quite a lot. Further examination of the multiple layers in the class showed that actually there were quite a few differences in participation among the members of the class. Bloome and Theodorou (1988) discuss the importance of going beyond the surface level analysis in order to accurately capture the interaction between teacher and students.

David Fetterman gives further reason for triangulation when he describes what he calls the Tunnel Vision Phenomena. (p86) "You might think for example, that if you videotaped the classroom, you wouldn't need to triangulate. That the camera tells all. The fact is that the camera honestly portrays what you focus it on."

He relates how in one of his studies he was observing a class using a video camera, and he remembers how well it enabled him to focus in on the students at the back of the class passing notes, sleeping, etc. His colleague, however, had taken notes during the same class and found he documented as many students being highly attentive. Consequently, he further triangulated by asking the students and teachers to review and discuss his video tapes.

One of the patterns previously mentioned that emerged was that non- native speakers generally do not like to talk in class if they are first language dominant. They worry about being the only person with a funny

accent or that the teacher and other students will not understand them. They will not speak aloud even if they know the answer. Often when asked by the teacher to respond they will not, even if they have the answer. How was this particular pattern triangulated? Interviews with and observations of the participants were analyzed and compared to each other to verify it. For example, here are three excerpts of interviews that were also compared to classroom observations, tapes, and casual conversations between participants and observers.

First interview

E: What do you like best? (re: class)

S: ..... um ...

E: Or maybe I should ask you what is the worst

S: What is the worst?

E: or the most difficult for you?

S: ... The most difficult? I think uh participating in class.

E: Participating in class? And why is that difficult for you?

S: Because I don't like to.

E: You don't like to?

S: No, I mean... sometimes people don't understand what I'm saying.That makes me mad 'cause I don't like to repeat things.

E: It makes you mad?

S: Yeah.

E: And you don't like to repeat.

S: Yeah. I don't like to - I don't know - some people hear that you have an accent and they just treat you ... different.

E: What happens when people - like when you say something and people don't understand. How do they react? What do they do?

S: Different people act differently. They ask me to - they say, "What? What's that? Or they just turn away.

E: They just turn away and they ignore you?

S: Yeah.

E: Oh.

S: I'd like to punch them in the face.

E: I won't ask you to repeat anything. I don't want to get my face punched.

Both laugh.

This interview could have been more subjectively interpreted in various ways if it was the only piece of data gathered. However, there were additional interviews with other students where it was also related that they were unconfortable talking aloud in class. This begins the triangulation (as it gives more points to the elephant sketch) but it might still be construed by some as subjective, as the interviewer's questions and communication style might affect participant response. Therefore, in addition, this data was further compared with recorded observations made in class.

In correlation, on a separate occasion this student was part of a small group in which the assistant was a participant observer. In examining the notes written during that event, it was highlighted (for further examination) that everyone in the group spoke quite a bit except this student. An attempt to label the roles of each group member had been noted, and this student had been labeled, "active listener," as he nodded his head and gave other non-verbal cues to indicate a social commitment to the

group. However, it was not until these notes were compared with the interview transcripts that his silence was more understood.

Second interview

E: Can you tell me a little bit about that class, like, um ... what do you need to do in that class in order to be successful ... like in order to pass, what, what are the things you need to do?

S2: I - do the homework, read ... participate in class ... which actually I don't do.

E: You don't participate in class?

S2: No.

E: Why?

S2: I don't know why, but I don't feel like talking ...(laughs)... sometimes, you know, he asks me, I know the answer, but I don't actually wanna answer.

E: You don't wanna answer it?

S2: You know, like, um, he asked me something about ...

E: umhm

S2: and I actually knew but I didn't wanna answer.

E: Why?

S2: (laughs) I don't know.

E: I mean, if you know the answer, why wouldn't you give him the answer?

(pause)

E: Are you a shy, really shy person, you don't like to speak, or

S2: (laughs) No, I'm not really shy shy ... I tell you I don't have any idea why I don't talk.

E: Well, something must go through your head when he says "Iris", you must think something... (she laughs), you think, I know the answer but I'm not gonna tell him. (laughs)

E: What do you think he thinks when you don't answer?

S2: Maybe I didn't study ... I really don't know.

Third Interview

S3: Well, in ESL class, everybody speaking English

E: Umhm

S3: have a you know, special accent.

E: Umhm

S3: And when you go into the regular class, everybody, you know, like most of them speaking ... English with American accent, and you are speaking like ... English with a other accent, you know like A- Asian accent, something like that, and the teacher say they couldn't understand and you know, when ... when he gotta try to concentrate, or when you say it, you just feel sorry for yourself.

E: Yeah

S3: Instead, you know, everybody all the same ... way, accent.

E: Uhhuh ... so you think that -

S3: That's why I don't speak much, very much in the rea- in the class, you don't speak ... I, I spoke a lot in, in ESL.

E: Yes...

S3: In that time...

E: And now you don't speak so much.

S3: No, I speak a lot at home, at work.

The following corollary to this pattern of not liking to talk in class was also defined and used to further substantiate it. If the teacher engages the student, they will talk aloud, but if the teacher disengages, the student will also disengage and not communicate. Class A/B, observed to be an exceptionally talkative one, was asked, "How is this class different?"(from other classes) They responded, "Chris tries to understand." On the other hand, previous examples of what ESL students percieve as disengaging behavior (i.e. deflecting questions asked during class by deferring them to office hours) illustrate how this adversly affects student participation.

Ethnography is being used in order to do the most inclusive study of this highly diverse community college culture. Ultimately, the act of triangulation in ethnographic research is a statement that diversity is expected, appreciated and valued in both the researchers and the researched alike. Preliminary interpretations show that positive interventions lead to engagement, participation and success for students entering the college mainstream. As more studies are done which can contribute to this critical area of transitioning community college students, we will learn more about how to increase participation and retention of non-native English speakers.